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Scotland vs The United States: Teaching art in universities

Keywords: empirical teaching experience, studio practices, teaching abroad, developmental and modular methodologies

Abstract: This is a short account of my own particular experience teaching a studio-based art course in America. It compares my experience there with my more common practice of teaching art in a Scottish university. Both institutions have their pluses and minuses when compared with one another, and this essay is intended only to provoke further discussion rather than present any conclusions about national pedagogies.

Jo Ganter

I have been a lecturer in art at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), now Edinburgh University, for a number of years. An invitation in 2011 to teach for a semester in the United States of America, at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMass), was bound to make me compare our two approaches to teaching art. UMass has a modular system where students take classes to gain merits, whereas education at the ECA is developmental: students are given studio spaces to work in, sometimes with very broad project briefs, but are always self-motivated; they must pass each year, but only their final degree shows count when we award degrees. The methodologies are opposites, and provide very different experiences for students and teachers alike.

UMass arranged for me to teach two classes: Intaglio 1, taught on Monday and Wednesday afternoons; and Postgraduate Block, a seminar programme taught on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Each teaching session would be three hours long. The rigour of the programming was in itself strange to me. In Edinburgh, students have very few timetabled classes. They work independently in their studios. It is expected that they are self-motivated. My role is to discuss their ideas, challenge and critique them. This is done through individual tutorials with each student and critiques among groups of students, often from different levels (second, third and fourth years).

As a printmaker, I have, in the past, taught many groups of students how to make etchings, lithographs and screen prints, but, increasingly, in Scotland purely technical skills are taught by the technical staff. As an academic, I discuss the use of technique as a vehicle for ideas, and may advise on the suitability of technique for an idea, but this activity is separated now from the teaching of technical and craft skill in Scottish art schools.

Teaching 'Intaglio 1' (Beginners' Etching) at UMass was a step back to the 1990s for me. It was a pleasure to do this, however, especially as UMass has recently acquired a brand new, purpose-built Studio Arts Building. Edinburgh College of Art celebrated its centenary in 2006. It boasts the best art studios I know, with fantastic views of Edinburgh Castle. But to work in an entirely new environment with hi-tech equipment was a treat. Furniture in the print workshop was all on wheels so that it could be moved around at will for the convenience of each class. I didn't have to walk for ten minutes with a

student from the print area to a computer lab, as 30 of the latest iMacs are accommodated in the print area, with two large-format inkjet printers at the disposal of printers in the adjoining suite. All this made the melding of traditional and digital print visible and available to the students. It is available in Edinburgh, but involves lengthy conversations with technicians who must serve the whole of Art and Design; their knowledge is broad to achieve this, and specialist knowledge required by individual artists takes more time and patience to achieve.

Intaglio 1 provided me with my first real experience of American students. They are of course no different to British students, but their expectation of me was predicated on what they were used to and so I was shocked to discover that they expected me to tell them *what* to draw on their etching plates. This is not something I have ever told a student. In the United Kingdom, my students come with sketchbooks of drawings and ideas; they are expected to discover subjects, research subjects and be motivated to explore subjects visually throughout all their work. Any project brief must be sufficiently broad to allow the students to use any subject matter they please. My US students hadn't had this demand made of them. One, seeing my confusion, explained that a previous tutor had required them to draw insects, 'because insects have lots of lines' and are therefore a suitable subject for etching. I explained that the hardest part of becoming an artist is to discover a subject matter that you wish to develop and work with, and they needed practice at this process of discovery. I therefore wasn't going to set any subject. 'Etching is a wonderful medium capable of depicting any subject, a medium should serve the purpose of the artist, not medium lead or limit us'. So went my introductory talk. They

responded with enthusiasm, turning as one to their laptops to find images from their store of photographs or those in Google. As in the UK, the photograph is also a major source for art works in America.

As the weeks passed, with six hours each week devoted to the learning of a single technique, my US students developed their skills with the medium well, and through the medium their imagery developed. They didn't consider not completing the course. This isn't an option in the system at UMass. Where my UK students may decide that a medium isn't for them, and give up a technical class mid-way without compunction, because it doesn't suit 'their work', at UMass they both had to complete in order to be graded and pass the year, and they didn't yet have the same sense of their own work in order to make such a judgement. This made it easier to communicate the craft skill involved in the technique in all its complexity, without having to sell it quickly. On the other hand, where I know that any skill gained will be developed conceptually through my student's body of work in Edinburgh, at UMass anything learnt may remain particular to one class. American students take longer to realize the full implications of what they learn, as they are more focused on passing the course and gaining credits, than their overall development as artists.

A concern for credits means that students in the United States are concerned about grades rather than verbal criticism. This is the tendency on both sides of the Atlantic, but my students in Scotland are less expectant of 'A' grades, and less upset by Bs and Cs.

This isn't a comprehensive UK/USA comparison. UMass is a large university with a Studio Art programme, not a specialist art school such as the Boston Museum School of Fine Art or Massachusetts College of Art; these schools have styles of teaching more directly comparable to art education in the United Kingdom. America provides a choice of styles and approaches to art education. At UMass, one of my students, although 'majoring' in art, was 'minoring' in economics. This isn't an option offered in the United Kingdom to my knowledge. In the present climate, we may want to consider it.